

Senate sends SCHIP bill to Bush's desk

By NOELLE STRAUB - Lee Washington Bureau - 09/28/07 – Helena Independent Record

WASHINGTON — An expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program, the only major piece of health care legislation to pass Congress this year, now heads to President Bush's desk for a possible veto after the Senate approved it Thursday.

"I'm very heartened by the very, very strong bipartisan support in the Senate," said Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus, D-Mont. "It essentially shows that senators want to help low-income children and to put politics aside And I hope that prevails at the White House."

The 67-29 vote means that the Senate could override a presidential veto. Supporters hope to persuade the president to drop his objections and sign the measure. But if he does not, the bill's fate may rest in the House, which did not pass the bill by a veto-proof margin.

It's "within striking distance" that House Democratic leaders could round up the two dozen or so additional supporters they need to overcome a veto, Baucus said. If not, the bill likely would stall.

In the meantime, Congress will pass a temporary extension of the program to keep it running beyond its expiration date of Sept. 30.

"What does the bill do?" asked Baucus, a lead author of the bill. "Basically it just provides more money so that kids who currently are eligible for CHIP but are not covered, will then be covered Otherwise the law does not change. The law is the same, eligibility provisions in this bill are the same."

Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., also supported the bill. But Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the Democrats were trying to use SCHIP as a Trojan horse for socializing health care.

"The point is a pursuit of a nationalized government-run health care," McConnell said.

Sen. Mike Enzi, R-Wyo., also opposed the bill, saying the program had lost sight of its original mission. "We shouldn't create a new federal entitlement and we shouldn't be laying the foundation for Castro-style health care, which Americans don't want," Enzi said in a statement.

Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., also opposed it, saying 2 million people who already have insurance would move onto the public rolls. "This includes not just low-income children," he said.

The measure Congress approved would raise SCHIP funding by \$35 billion over five years, paid for largely by a 61-cent-per-pack tax increase on cigarettes. Bush wants to increase it by \$5 billion and opposes the cigarette tax boost.

Lawmakers said the Senate bill would add 3.3 million children to the program, bringing the total covered to 9.9 million. In Montana it would add more than 12,000 children, Baucus said, or about one-third of the uninsured kids in the state. The bill would phase out childless adults on the program.

Bush has claimed that the proposal would move millions of children with private health insurance into "government-run health care." Baucus said the administration didn't worry about moving people from private to government insurance when it established the Medicare prescription drug program.

The administration wants to limit coverage to households under 200 percent of the poverty line, an annual income of about \$34,000 for a family of three.

Baucus said the new measure would simply extend current law, which limits coverage to the higher of 200 percent of poverty or 50 percent above the state's prior Medicaid levels. States that want to cover over 200 percent must apply for and be granted a waiver by the administration.

The bill would apply a lower federal match rate for those over 300 percent of poverty, he added. It also has a new policy that any state wanting to cover over 300 percent first meet target enrollment levels for children below 200 percent of poverty.

“Our bill therefore would decrease the incentive to cover higher-income children relative to current law,” Baucus said. Currently each state can set its own eligibility limits. The 2007 Montana Legislature increased the family cutoff from 150 percent of the federal poverty level to 175 percent.

Bush has claimed the bill would cover children in families making up to \$83,000 a year. But Baucus said, “That just is not true.”

He added, “There is nothing in the current bill that would let that happen.”

SCHIP is a federal-state program to help children whose families don’t qualify for Medicaid but cannot afford private health insurance to get coverage. Any SCHIP funding increase would be on top of the \$25 billion now available over five years.